

Solitude in Cyberspace

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Digital literature is usually described with the keywords of increasing collectivism: shared authorship, reader-viewer interaction, their active participation in creating text etc. The current paper examines the opposite phenomenon, solitude, and does it from two aspects: a) the solitude of the creator and b) the solitude of creative work.

The term solitude naturally also refers to the romantic principle of creative work and associates with the aesthetical concepts of art as self-expression or art for art's sake. The current paper disregards this aspect, as well as the emotional and psychological connotations of the word. Solitude is here regarded as a technical term, which shows the share of different agents in a creative process.

1. Solitude and author's responsibility

When writers write their texts they are usually on their own. A text is born in the writer's head and he or she needs some kind of form to present it. Until the form of literature was mostly what was recorded on paper, we could say that the author formalised his text in solitude – writing alone on pieces of paper. Only when handing in the manuscript were other participants in the completion process of the literary work added: editor, designer and printer. Each era has naturally also had authors keen to discuss their incomplete texts with friends, introduce half-completed excerpts to others. Such authors are thus to some extent influenced by others, although this depends on the author's character rather than on the form of the text. If we expand the historical dimension of the problem, two aspects could be added: peculiarities of oral and collective creative work (folklore) and the anonymity of the writer preceding the modernist authorship (cf. Foucault). In his essay "What is an author?" Foucault points out that the author emerges on the threshold of the modern era and it brings about not only his independence as a creator, but also social responsibility. Following this line of thinking, we could claim that precisely the modern author's position (public name) not only glorifies the author as a divine creator, but forces him into solitude together with the work he is creating. Responsibility and the author's name simultaneously denote appreciating personality beside God, but also the creator's burden. Although Barthes's "The Death of the Author", which preceded Foucault's essay, is generally seen as more radical, reducing the author's position in relation to text, the opposite could easily be claimed. It is namely Barthes who tries to liberate the author from the burden of social responsibility, thus reserving him for free creative work. The author lacks control over the fate of his completed text, but he also lacks

responsibility. Foucault, on the other hand, abolishes the author's freedom totally. His idea of the author is an agent who categorises and values texts, which are separated from the author as a human being, as well as from the creator who checks the meaning of the text. However, the author's responsibility is still there.

We could thus generally claim that the creative work of the post-printing author of the modern era is born in solitude, and the solitude is an inevitable attendant phenomenon in the emergence of a renaissance creator.

2. Solitude and digital Literature

These relations, however, change significantly in case of digital literature where the production is not a printed book, but cyber- or hypertext.

The changes are caused by at least two circles of reasons. The first naturally constitutes the peculiarities of creating digital literature (more about this below). Secondly, the position and functioning of digital literature in society as a whole, including: (1) its relations with the traditional mainstream printed literature, (2) its impact as national or beyond national, (3) its relations with other types of text (primarily mass media) and art.

In addition to the author of the text, cybertexts and hypertexts need active co-authors - programmers, designers and others. Creating a cybertext is therefore basically a collective act, although there are of course exceptions. An electronic writer or poet could thus be technologically skilled and also familiar with web design, or might use special programmes for writing hypertext literature (e.g. Storyspace). However, an ordinary writer who wants to experiment with hypertext literature does not, on the whole, have sufficient technological knowledge and needs assistants. Relying on Philippe Bootz, the electronic poet Jim Rosenberg has compared an author of a cybertext with a filmmaker (83). Just like a filmmaker, a cybertext author needs a team who realises his ideas. The author of a cybertext is no longer the only and unique creator.

3. Digimodernist turn

Alan Kirby has launched the concept of digimodernism which marks the cultural stage connected with the spread of Web 2.0 in the early 21st century (cf. Kirby, "Digimodernism"). This can also be associated with Henry Jenkins's concept of "participatory culture" and the democratisation of culture (cf. e.g. Jenkins). The "digimodernist turn" in the form of blogs, wikis, Facebook and Twitter also brings about a change for authors of digital literature. The technological simplicity of software of the new web platforms and especially the simplicity of blog software meant that the authors no longer needed any urgent technical assistance. Although Alan Kirby himself has expressed doubt whether digimodernist literature actually exists (Kirby, "Another interview I gave"), we can regard for example the numerous literary blogs as such. Most blogs have been seen as descriptions of everyday life, writings focusing on a specific topic or an alternative journalism. Besides the autobiographical aspect of blogs and the form of life-writing, the blog researcher Jill Walker Rettberg, for instance, has noted the fictional essence of some blogs and analysed the blogs' narrative structures (111–126). Digimodernist literary blogs might for example be the writers' blogs where autobiographical stories are presented in a polished literary form. Or blogs that mix the factual and the fictional, blogs where the author knowingly plays around at the boundaries of fabrication and reality, and blogs where the author tells the readers in advance that they were reading fiction. Plus blogs presenting some literary narrative and blogs publishing poetry. We can therefore consider certain blogs to be literary phenomena and regard their authors as writers.

When we turn to the topic of solitude, it should be pointed out that the technological simplicity of the digimodernist turn brings forth the problem of the author's solitude – he is once again formalising his work on his own, just like with printed books.

At the same time the solitude of a creative work in cyberworld disappears. After publishing a book in print, the author lost control over it. In other words – the work was left on its own, or to be precise, the text began living its own life independently of the author.

In cyberworld, on the contrary, connections in various forms between the author, the work and the reader are retained (e.g. fan fiction, collective cyber novels, comments to blogs). The most significant difference, however, is retaining the author's controlling function. The author reacts to comments, can close down his blog at any time, edit the already published texts. Each text of course leaves a trace on the Internet, but it is neither public nor available to all.

It might thus seem paradoxical that in the printed world both the author and his work are solitary, whereas in cyberworld the solitude of creative work vanishes, because the cybertexts as well as the blogs need feedback from the readers and interaction between authors and readers. At the same time the author's solitude in cyberspace is twofold – creating cybertexts mostly requires some assistance, whereas digimodernist blog literature can be produced in solitude, independently.

4. Staircase and Sonnet Machine

Very few cybertexts in Estonian digital literature have been produced as teamwork, with technical assistance. One of the first was Hasso Krull's hypertextual poem *Trepp* (*Staircase*, cf. Krull). Krull, a poet always eager to experiment and familiar with post-structural theories, tested the possibilities of creating a hypertext at an early phase when the Internet had just arrived in Estonia. This is a classical hypertext poem, which is essentially simple. The poem has a fixed beginning, and navigating along links enables to read the poem differently. Selecting a certain path, the poem reaches the ending chosen by the author. Navigating by other paths, however, readers might find themselves in a circle without an exit. The poem is of excellent literary quality and with its various links offers different poetic impressions. The links are emphasised by different colours, the beginning and ending of the poem are marked by a picture.

This hypertextual poem is a typical case where the poet tries to experiment with new technological possibilities, but needs the help of a computer expert to realise his idea. Web design and linking the hypertext were organised by Krull's technical assistant. This remained Krull's only attempt in hypertext poetry, and after that he returned to traditional forms of poetry.

One of the grandest team projects was the *Sonnet Machine* initiated by the poet, translator and cultural theoretician Märt Väljataga in 2000. He was inspired by Raymond Queneau's work *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), although Väljataga developed his project *Sada tuhat miljardit millenniumisonetti* (One Hundred Thousand Billion Millennium Sonnets) to the extreme. By combining different strips in a book of strips (cf. Väljataga), it was indeed possible to form 100 000 000 000 000 sonnets. In addition, an Internet text generator was created in 2000, which allowed to combine lines in different positions and could thus produce $(20 \times 19)^7 \times 7 = 5\,766\,545\,362\,636\,800\,000\,000$ English sonnets. It could also produce a huge number of Italian sonnets and 14-verse poems with other rhyme schemes. In addition to the book and the web version, Väljataga and his assistants constructed an enormous sonnet machine and displayed it in an art gallery. The machine was electromechanical and by operating it manually it was possible to create millions of sonnets. The original idea of Väljataga – to take Raymond Queneau's idea further – thus resulted in three solutions: on paper, on the Internet and in the huge sonnet machine. What should be pointed out here is that Väljataga could not realise a single of his ideas on his own. The designer helped with the book, the Internet text generator was mostly provided by the programmer Hannu Krosing, and the co-authors of the monster artefact were artist Lennart Mänd and composer Rauno Remme (see also Kesküla). Unfortunately Väljataga did not experiment any further, he produced no more internet projects and built no more new mechanical poetry machines. The most curious and regrettable fact about the whole project is that only the printed book still exists today. The text generator disappeared from the net after the crash of the server and the sonnet machine installation was dismantled. Only a few pictures have survived of the latter.

Considering the technological experimentation of Estonian writers, these two examples are exceptional rather than usual. There have been only a few other smaller projects (e.g. Tabet Tamme's project *The Weather Station Never Lies*, Lemmit Kaplinski and Jaak Tomberg's *Prepare*).

Estonian authors have been reluctant to try out computer-technological experiments, despite the general fascination with technology in Estonian society. However, the digimodernist change has altered the situation. All of a sudden, the Estonian writers seem to have overcome their aversion to technology and are eagerly

using the possibilities offered by Web 2.0. So are many Estonian writers active bloggers and Facebook users (e.g. Kivisildnik, Olavi Ruitlane, Aare Pilv and others). The writers' blogs include all aspects of the above-described literary blogs: there are autobiographical descriptions, the authors publicly declare that they are producing fiction, they publish poetry, play on the boundaries of the factual and the fictional (e.g. the blog of Olavi Ruitlane who passed autobiographical material off as fiction). Several writers express their opinion about literature and literary life. And quite a few have published their blogs in book format.

In sum – the Estonian writers who were earlier afraid of technology have become very keen on it in the digimodernist world.

What could have caused this change? Why have the Estonian writers not been eager to conduct elaborate computer-technological experiments that require cooperation with different specialists, but are ready to actively blog and use technological platforms, which are easy to use and thus do not demand any assistance?

5. Estonian author as a solitary author

One possible reason could be the wish to be independent. Estonian writers want to be solitary in cyberspace, write on their own, be fully responsible and not participate in teamwork, in a collective act of creative work. This could be explained by the well-worn thesis about the smallness of Estonian literature, which levels the experiments and extremes outside the mainstream. The reason might also be the general conservative attitude towards all cultural manifestations in the otherwise technology-keen Estonian society.

Of course, we can argue that there exist authors of digital literature who are technologically skilful and are familiar with programming, and therefore we can speak in these cases only about one, single author not about cooperation between different agents. However, on the other hand, such a person unites various agents or roles himself (as does the writer who illustrates his own works and a poet setting his poem to music).

If we look at parallels in other areas, then we see that for example the Estonian pictorial art quite easily accepted video and installation practices that employ technological possibilities from the 1990s onwards; also the opportunities offered by the Internet and digital art. Numerous examples can also be found in music and syntheses of music and pictorial art. Literature in Estonia is therefore sort of continuing the tradition of modernist author, without wishing to give up the position of an individual author. Digimodernist technological simplicity indeed enables the organic transfer from printed text to digital literature, which does not endanger the author's position. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that even writers who are active in blogosphere, Facebook or twitter are still primarily interested in publishing their message, and not so much in exchanging ideas, dialogues etc, which might cause the message to be changed or transformed into collective work. In conclusion, we could say that an Estonian writer is essentially a solitary author.

Cyberculture, however, emphatically reveals the paranoid position of a "dead" author. The printed text can be interpreted, although its original form can no longer be altered, whereas this is often possible in the digital sphere. A blog text can be changed, locked, cyberworks can be deleted. At the same time the public cyberspace is full of endless fragments about people, of which these people might not even be aware of, and certainly cannot control their existence. It seems that digimodernism eliminates the creative solitude and the responsibility of an author (e.g. the author can correct the texts later), but at the same time this elimination is rather deceptive and imaginary. Instead, it tends to conceal the solitude and responsibility, pushing them into the depths of the subconscious rather than nullify them.

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